



News Release

IDAHO DEPARTMENT OF WATER RESOURCES
1301 N. Orchard St., Boise, ID 83706 - TEL: (208) 327-7900 FAX: (208) 327-7866
Internet Homepage: <http://www.idwr.state.id.us>

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IDWR WATERMASTERS USING HIGH TECH
TO SPOT, INVESTIGATE UNAUTHORIZED WATER USE

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For Media Information Contact:
Dick Larsen - (208) 327-7933

If you plan to irrigate land on Idaho's Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer without a valid water right, you would be well advised to reconsider. That's because chances are good state watermasters, combining satellite imagery and high tech computer software, are going to see what you are doing, the Idaho Department of Water Resources announced today.

IDWR and watermasters from Water Districts 120 and 130 in Southern Idaho plan to employ computer technology and satellite images of the ESPA taken during the 2003 irrigation season to watch for unauthorized water use.

Using geographic information system computer technology, they will overlay the images with computer generated digital outlines of the specific water right boundaries. Areas being irrigated without a corresponding water right then can be identified and checked with on-site field investigations. Use of water without a valid water right can result in civil penalties of up to \$300 per acre.

The system was introduced last year in IDWR Water Districts 120 and 130. The technique proved highly effective at spotting locations where land was being irrigated with a water right. The two districts cover thousands of irrigated acres in southern Idaho stretching from the Hagerman-Gooding area to north of Idaho Falls.

In most cases of unauthorized irrigation, the water user has upgraded irrigation systems to center pivot systems and expanded the irrigation on to lands that are not covered by their water rights. Under Idaho water law, that constitutes an illegal use of water.

If other areas under the same water rights are not being irrigated, the non-irrigated acres can be used to cover the new irrigation. However, an IDWR-approved water right transfer is required to make the change legal under Idaho water law.

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State watermasters have the authority to curtail illegal uses of water, including unauthorized changes of existing rights. In 2002 the Districts' watermasters and IDWR worked with a number of individuals to correct unauthorized irrigation problems by filing water right transfers. But IDWR officials say the water right transfer process can be lengthy - a transfer filed now may not be approved before the end of the current irrigation season.

Last irrigation season the Water District 120 watermaster investigated more than 20 areas of concern and found several instances where land was being irrigated without apparent water rights. The Water District 130 watermaster investigated a variety of areas of concern and identified about a half-dozen sites, ranging in size from 24 to 150 acres, being irrigated without apparent water rights

In both Districts, watermasters issued notices requiring users to halt the suspect irrigation. Several notice of violations issued also were issued which resulted in additional administrative penalties being paid.

State water managers have initially focused on the two southern Idaho water districts because they represent areas of the state where there have been major legal battles between ground and surface water users over the amount of water available. Creation of new water districts and enforcement of water rights by IDWR-appointed watermasters were also key elements of a stipulated agreement between ground and surface water users that is helping to resolve the conflict.

Although the current focus is the two water districts in the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer, IDWR water right agents throughout the state also have increasingly turned to the high tech approach to help them better manage water rights in their areas.

IDWR officials are strongly urging irrigators and landowners to know the limits of their water rights and plan ahead for any changes. If you have questions regarding water rights, contact the nearest IDWR regional office or the watermaster responsible for your area.